DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 250 635 CG 017 837

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TITLE The Influence of Personal Values and Self Concept on the Selection of an Academic Major.
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association (30th, New Orleans, LA, March 28-31, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Career Choice; *College Students; Higher Education; *Majors (Students); *Self Concept; Sex Differences; *Values

ABSTRACT

To examine the interrelationships among undergraduate students' interests and values, their self-concepts, and their choice of an academic major, 298 college students (116 males, 182 females) completed a self-report questionnaire, the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, and the Allport-Vernon-Lindzey Study of Values. An analysis of the results showed that students whose current major was the same as their desired major scored significantly higher on total self-concept than did students who reported a discrepancy between their current and preferred major. A significant interaction between risk and self-concept revealed that low risk students scored lower than high risk students on social and personal self-concept. High risk students reported higher values in the social realm, while low risk students reported higher theoretical values. Sex by self-concept interaction revealed that females scored high on the moral-ethical self, family self, and social self, while males scored higher in the areas of physical and personal self. Males scored highest on economic, political, and theoretical values, while females were highest on aesthetic, religious, and social values. Finally, males in this study had changed their majors more frequently than had females, but tended to exhibit a greater consistency between their personal values and choice of an academic major. (BL)

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ED250635

THE INFLUENCE OF PERSONAL VALUES AND SELF CONCEPT ON THE SELECTION OF AN ACADEMIC MAJOR

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CG017837

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, New Orleans, LA, March 29-31, 1984.

The Influence of Personal Values and Self Concept on the Selection of an Academic Major

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This study is the first of several investigations into the nature of value and personality changes of students during their college years. The purpose of this inquiry was to examine interrelationships among undergraduate students' interests and values, their self concept, and their choice of an academic major.

Research over the past decade has focused on various aspects of academic and career choices. Morrow (1971) tested the effectiveness of Holland's theory of vocational choice in predicting students' satisfaction with their selection of college majors. Three dimensions of personality interaction, as proposed by Holland, were investigated: congruence-incongruence, consistency-inconsistency, and homogeneity-heterogeneity. Differences in mean satisfaction scores obtained from students of the same personality dimension but with different academic majors were analyzed for each of six interest themes (Realistic, Intellectual, Social, Conventional, Enterprising, and Artistic). Results of the six t-tests indicated that three interest themes were significant, one theme approached significance, and two were not significant. These results indicate that Holland's interest themes and personality dimensions were related to student choices and satisfaction.

During the middle 1970's additional research focused on indecision and undecisiveness in students' selections of college

majors. One team of investigators designed a scale to assess and identify antecedents of educational-vocational indecision (Osipow, Carney, & Barak, 1976). Their results indicated that the scale was reliable and seemed to discriminate career-decided behaviors from career-undecided behaviors. Data obtained from this scale provides evidence that indecision and indecisiveness are two basic and different factors to be considered in understanding career choices.

More recently Taylor (1982) found that vocationally undecided college students in contrast to decided students were more externally oriented in their locus of control, were more fearful of success, and achieved lower ACT scores. Her results demonstrate that not only is indecision an important factor in career choice but that personality characteristics and other individual difference variables are also very important in such choices.

The preceding research is illustrative of studies indicating the diverse and complex nature of students' career choices. The present study expands upon this research base by considering students' personal values and their self-concepts as related to the selection of an academic major, an important step in the process of selecting a career. The decisions which are made are likely to have a profound long-term impact on a young adult's style of life and sense of well being. Basic to these decisions is the student's value system which determines to a large degree what the career choice will be and how well the student will perform in this career. Personal satisfaction is realized when one's values are confirmed and permitted expression through

career-related activities. Incompatible values or conflicts between what a person is currently doing and what he or she desires may seriously affect the realization of one's fullest potential and may also affect that individual's personal adjustment. On the other hand, if values and behaviors are consistent, the individual is likely to achieve desired goals and experience a sense of well being.

In the process of selecting an academic major some students choose an area, are highly satisfied with it, and appear to have no desire to change. However, it is recognized that other students change from one area to another because they have assessed their abilities, confronted their personal value system and have concluded that they are making a change which will integrate their values with their career preference and, therefore, enhance their feelings of self worth. For the purposes of this study, the foregoing students were defined as "low risk" -- their current academic major was the same as their desired major. However, a great many students change majors because they conclude that what they are currently doing is not "right" and are seeking to establish a consistency among their values, self concept, and academic concentration. Hence, they decide to "shop around" and may change their major several times. For this study, these students were defined as "high risk" -- a discrepancy or conflict between their current choice of a major and their preferred major. For high-risk students a change in major is often unsuccessful. As a result these students may (1) feel they are wasting their time (and, indeed, may be doing so), (2) underperform and not realize their potential and personal goals,

(3) continue to change majors in search of a "good match," (4) "drop-out" until they can integrate their values and self-concept with an appropriate academic concentration, and/or (5) "drop-out" and reorient their interests in nonacademic endeavors.

Two hypotheses guided the present study:

1. Low-risk students will score higher on a measure of self-concept than will high-risk students.
2. Low-risk students will show more consistency between their personal values and choice of an academic major than will high-risk students.

Method

Two hundred ninety eight (298) students, 116 males and 182 females, enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses were assigned to either a "low risk" or a "high risk" group. Included in the low risk group (N=190) were students whose current academic major was the same as their desired major. Members of the high risk group (N=108) reported a discrepancy or conflict betweeen their current choice of a major and their preferred major. Students attended one of five experimental sessions where they were informed of the nature of the study. All students completed a brief self-report questionnaire including such items as current major, desired major, satisfaction with current choice, likelihood of change, reasons for changes already made, etc. Students also completed the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (total score and subscores of physical, moral-ethical, personal, family, and social self) and the Allport-Vernon-Lindzey Study of Values composed of six basic value areas -- theoretical, economic, aesthetic, social,

political, and religious.

Results

A number of interesting differences were observed between low- and high-risk students, i.e., between those students whose current major was the same as their desired major and those students who reported a discrepancy between their current and their preferred major. As predicted, low-risk students scored significantly higher on a total self-concept score than did high-risk students ($F = 4.02$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). Furthermore, this relationship was strengthened when the five self-concept subscores were analyzed as a within subjects variable ($F = 4.53$, $df = 1$, $p < .03$). A significant interaction between risk and self-concept subscores revealed that low-risk students scored higher in four of the five component areas ($F = 3.06$, $df = 4$, $p < .02$). Low- risk students scored lower than high-risk students only on the "social self" component. High-risk students were particularly low on the "personal self" component.

Interestingly, a related pattern of results for low- and high-risk students was also obtained with our measure of values. Again, high-risk students expressed higher values in the social area ($F = 3.39$, $df = 1$, $p < .07$) while low-risk students expressed significantly higher theoretical values ($F = 6.98$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$). Finally, as expected, low-risk students were considerably more satisfied with their current major than were high-risk students ($r = -.49$, $p < .0001$).

Hypothesis two was only marginally supported. Low-risk students did show more consistency between their personal values

and their choice of an academic concentration but not to a statistically significant degree. Students who exhibited the most consistency scored higher in four of the six value areas -- theoretical, economic, social, and political ($F = 7.36$, $df = 5$, $p < .0001$). The least consistent students scored highest in the aesthetic and religious areas.

Strong and consistent sex differences were also obtained in this study. A highly significant sex by self-concept interaction revealed that females scored high on the moral-ethical self, family self, and social self while males predominated in the areas of physical and personal self ($F = 9.58$, $df = 4$, $p < .0001$). In addition, males and females differed significantly on each of the six value areas ($F = 34.07$, $df = 5$, $p < .0001$). This interaction supports other findings of this study. Males scored highest on economic, political, and theoretical values while females were highest on aesthetic, religious, and social values. Finally, males in this study had changed their majors more frequently than had females ($r = -.13$, $p < .03$) but tended to exhibit a greater consistency between their personal values and choice of an academic major ($r = -.11$, $p < .07$).

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the early identification of high risk students, who are experiencing a conflict between their current and desired areas of concentration, may be very important if these students are to realize their potentials and achieve personal satisfaction. These high-risk students were consistently lower in their self-concept scores than

their low-risk counterparts. Their view of personal self was particularly low and their satisfaction with their current major was also very low. These factors certainly do not provide a good prognosis for academic success. One theme which emerged from both the self-concept and the values measures is that low-risk students appear to be more "academically" oriented while high-risk students express greater social concerns. Both of these groups, but particularly the high-risk student, may benefit from personalized advising programs designed to enhance the integration of their personal values and self-concept with their choice of an academic major. Without such guidance, high-risk students are likely to change their majors several times without experiencing personal satisfaction and success. These students are likely to underperform in the classroom and may become academic "drop-outs."

Sex differences among undergraduates must also be kept clearly in mind. While recent societal trends have broadened traditional sex roles, particularly for women, many undergraduate students have remained quite traditionally oriented in their career choices. The consistent and strong sex differences obtained in this study for both self-concept and personal values emphasize first the importance of individual differences in selecting academic majors, and second the importance of the orientation of advisors and counselors who assist students in making their career choices.

The results of this study appear to be very much in keeping with Taylor's (1982) earlier research. "A potentially productive approach to the understanding of vocational indecision involves not only the investigation of factors related to indecision, but

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